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## INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM'S LAST FRONTIER

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### I. Introduction

In February, 1959, the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, comprised of President George Meany, Secretary-Treasurer William Schnitzler, and the heads of 27 national and international unions, met in San Juan, Puerto Rico. At that meeting, the Executive Council dealt with several major items of business, including, among other things, the problem of coping with the groundswell which culminated a few months later in the Landrum-Griffin Act. As labor meetings go, this one was well-publicized in the popular press. Very little attention, however, was given an Executive Council decision which may prove, in the long run, the most important decision of that San Juan meeting, or, for that matter, any labor meeting of recent memory.

The AFL-CIO Organizing Department was instructed to form an Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee -- the first industrial organizing committee since the AFL-CIO merger, and the first in any arm of the American labor movement since the great drives in auto and steel twenty and more years ago. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) was to be financed from a special fund for "organizing the unorganized" -- a fund built up through an assessment of one penny per month, for six months, on every member of every AFL-CIO affiliate in the country.

After careful study, AFL-CIO's Director of Organization, Jack Livingston, chose a locale for the drive: the heart of California's Central Valley, where the land is fabulously rich, the growing season long, and hired farm laborers are employed by the hundreds of thousands. As chief-of-staff for the campaign, Livingston chose Norman Smith, a labor veteran with many years' organizational experience in auto, construction, steel, and other basic industries. Smith selected a small technical staff, and a group of organizers, most of whom came directly from work in the fields and orchards of the area. In June, 1959, AWOC opened its doors at the old labor temple on the corner of Weber and Grant Streets, Stockton.

In this article, we shall examine the following questions: Why did the AFL-CIO create an Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee? What has AWOC accomplished in its first year and a half? What is AWOC looking forward to in the seasons ahead? Why do we suggest that this drive is perhaps the most important development within the American labor movement in recent memory?

### II. Why an AWOC?

Although agriculture may be a "way of life" to some farmers in some parts of the country, in the Southwest -- and increasingly in other areas as well -- it is a business essentially like any other. In California,



for example, the average farm-business covers about 330 acres, is capitalized at more than \$80,000, has a realized gross income of approximately \$25,000 per year, and a realized net income of over \$7,500. (These figures are misleadingly low, since they include a large number of "week-end" farms which are owned, more as playthings than as commercial undertakings, by doctors, lawyers, and other "sidewalk farmers.")

Agriculture, in a word, is a large and basic industry: indeed, the largest and most basic in the country. It has larger dollar sales than any other. It employs more people than any other: between 2,000,000 and 2,500,000, not including a million or more sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and others who are nominally classified as "self-employed", but are for all practical purposes hired workers.

By and large, the condition of American workers in the industry of agriculture more closely resembles the condition of workers in "underdeveloped" areas of the world than other industrial workers in our "developed" economy. For example, on August 4, 1960, the U.S. Bureau of Employment Security certified that the "most common wage rate" for cotton chopping in the Central Mississippi River Delta region was 35 cents an hour, without room, board, or other perquisites. Average total yearly earnings (from non-agricultural as well as agricultural employment) are less than \$900 for the nation's farm workers -- about one fifth the annual earnings of workers in other basic industries. Underemployment is pandemic -- the average "full-time" farm laborer gets 144 days of work a year -- but no form of income protection is available. Child labor is widespread. Working conditions are totally unregulated. The most elemental amenities -- toilets, handwashing facilities, drinking water -- are missing. And it goes almost without saying that farm laborers receive no fringe benefits of the types taken for granted by other workers: paid vacations, sick leave, health insurance, pensions.

By wrapping themselves in the mantle of farming "as a way of life," employers in industrialized agriculture have sought and obtained exemption from practically every form of legislation by which society has seen fit to protect industrial workers generally. The farm labor force is excluded, wholly or in large part, from most labor and industrial relations legislation at the State level, and from Federal wage and hour laws, child labor laws, Social Security, unemployment insurance, and legislation guaranteeing workers the right to organize and bargain collectively.

Such uniquely discriminatory treatment has resulted in a farm labor force which is disorganized and often demoralized; which, permitted no room for responsibility, sometimes acts irresponsibly; and which, treated as third-class citizens, often fails to ask for or avail itself of rights supposedly basic to our form of society. The existence of an unstable, disorganized, demoralized labor force of more than 2,000,000 workers inevitably tends toward an undermining effect upon labor markets which are stable and organized. Although some persons might like to do so, it is still not possible to isolate farm workers, altogether, from the rest of society. There is some movement, therefore, of farm laborers into other types of work -- particularly in the agricultural off-season -- and they take with them an undervaluation of their own worth, inexperience in working with other people toward a common goal, unfamiliarity with ~~unionism~~ the benefits and obligations of unionism. Like rows of dominoes toppling, an indirect effect is produced, reaching, eventually, even the craft unions which are oldest, best organized, and farthest removed in every respect from agricultural laborers. It is no



exaggeration to say that every wage earner in the United States is a little the poorer because wage earners in the country's biggest industry are miserably paid, insecure, and defenseless.

The AFL-CIO created AWOC, then, for two basic reasons: to protect the rest of the house of labor; and to bring into the house of labor a group of workers who have shivered (literally and figuratively) outside, unsheltered, too long.

### III. AWOC's Accomplishments

For the first six months or so, the AWOC staff proceeded quietly -- listening more than talking -- learning where the workers were, what kinds of people they were, what they did, how long they worked, for whom they worked, how much they earned, what they thought about labor unions, what they thought about themselves. Last winter, in the citrus harvest of Tulare County, AWOC organizers began to move toward collective action.

Some gains were made in that crop-area, but, even more importantly, a corps of dedicated and informed rank-and-file members was developed. In organizing the citrus workers of Tulare County, AWOC had, in effect, organized a traveling local union. When the navel orange harvest in Tulare County is completed each year, around the middle of April, many of the workers leave, to follow a regular cycle which takes them into San Joaquin County cherries, Yolo County apricots, Sutter County peaches, Lake County pears, and other major California crop-areas. Working with this "traveling local" throughout the 1960 season, AWOC proved two very important things: (1) given advance preparation, farm laborers -- including "unorganizable" migrants -- can and will stay organized; (2) when they work together in this manner, they can and do make economic gains, sometimes faster and more substantial than they themselves or their leaders thought possible.

pickers

This spring, in San Joaquin County cherries, ~~workers~~/requested a base rate of \$1.10 per 16-quart bucket rather than the starting rate of \$.80 which the Cherry Growers Association proposed to pay. After some skirmishing, all but two of the county's several hundred cherry growers paid the \$1.10 rate, with higher rates negotiated in a number of orchards where picking was unusually difficult.

AWOC's next major activity was in the apricot harvest centering around Winters, Yolo County. The bulk of this crop had been picked the previous year at \$.90 per hour. On behalf of the workers, AWOC requested \$1.25 an hour. ~~From the resistance of growers~~ The resistance of growers weakened as they found difficulty recruiting workers who would cross AWOC picket lines. The apricots were harvested at \$1.25 an hour.

So it has gone in a number of other crop-areas. AWOC has been instrumental in wage increases totaling several million dollars in its areas of operation. (AWOC's research staff is currently preparing a precise estimate of its economic accomplishments in the 1960 season.) These gains have not come painlessly. So far this year, there have been 75 agricultural strikes in California serious enough to be certified by the State's Department of Employment as "bona fide labor disputes." Norman Smith, AWOC Director,



has said, "I take no pride in the fact we have called more farm strikes this year than any State has ever had in a year before. A strike is a weapon you use only as a last resort, after you have tried everything else. But all the screams about "crops rotting in the fields" won't stop me as long as the growers refuse to bargain, or even to admit we exist. I'm nowhere near so worried about crops rotting in the fields as I am about human beings rotting in the fields -- which they've been doing in California for one hundred years now."

AWOC's accomplishments during its first year and a half also include the demolition of the myth that "Americans won't do farm labor" -- a myth advanced in the halls of Congress for the past 18 years to justify the existence of foreign contract farm labor programs. Although thousands of braceros had been used in the California peach, pear, apricot, and cherry harvests in previous years, in these and other crops in which AWOC achieved an average rate of \$1.25 an hour, the use of Mexican Nationals was almost entirely eliminated. The growers' associations, and government agencies, which had planned for the usual artificial "labor shortage" were considerably embarrassed in some cases to find there were more than enough American workers available. Busloads of hapless braceros who had been shipped in had to be paid whatever was due them and ~~then~~ shipped back to Mexico almost before the season had begun.

#### IV. The Road Ahead

In forthcoming seasons, AWOC will need to move beyond the arena of wages to ~~the~~ even more taxing contests involving working conditions, fringe benefits, job security, and (most importantly) union recognition. The gains of the past season were accomplished outside any sort of systematic or permanent collective bargaining framework. Agricultural employers will certainly resist the establishment of such a framework even more vigorously than they have resisted wage increases. And agriculture, as noted above, is the sole industrial exclusion from the Labor-Management Relations Act of 1947, which provides machinery for workers to select their collective bargaining unit, and requires employers to negotiate with those units in good faith. Barring some dramatic breakthrough which cannot be foreseen, it may take considerable time for AWOC to gain official recognition from any major group of agricultural employers.

Another of AWOC's tasks which lies ahead is the building of local unions among that segment of the farm labor force which is sometimes called "the home guard." Surprisingly enough, most of AWOC's successes to date have been gained through the organization of those types of workers who might seem least organizable: migrants and casuals. It might seem that the farm workers who maintain a permanent residence on the outskirts of agricultural towns like Stockton, and who work the year around at tasks such as irrigating, pruning, fertilizing, spraying, cultivating, and harvesting in season, afford the best prospects for enduring organization. The problem is more one of logistics than of strategy or tactics. There is no ~~one~~ place in which large numbers of the "home guard" congregate, as migrant farm workers congregate in trailer camps or squatter camps, and casual farm workers congregate in anachronistic shape-ups. AWOC's organizing staff is small,



and so far, at least, the leadership has felt that each organizer could reach more workers per day in ways other than the slow door-to-door work required to reach the "home guard." Eventually, however, AWOC must contact and enlist the "home guard" because it is larger than any other segment of the farm labor force, because it fills many crucially important types of agricultural jobs, and because the farm labor movement can scarcely afford separations within its own ranks. No one has seriously proposed that the farm labor union be organized along other than industry-wide lines.

Finally, it remains for AWOC to expand outward, geographically, from its present base of operations. The campaign to date has been in the nature of a pilot project. It will continue as such until binding contracts are signed, local unions are chartered, and it becomes evident that an effective, self-supporting organization will remain ~~if~~ even if AWOC support ceases. At that point, AWOC will move on: first, perhaps, to Southern California, where hourly farm wage rates are now as low as \$.75 an hour, and piece rates often lower. Then, perhaps, to Arizona, where hourly and piece rates are even lower; then to New Mexico and Texas, where farm wages are lower still; eventually to the Southeastern States, where wages and working conditions are worst of all.

#### V. The Real Importance of AWOC

If and when it reaches all the wage workers in industrialized agriculture, a farm labor union will be substantially the largest union in the country, and <sup>among</sup> the most strategically situated in terms of its relation to the nationaleconomy. These considerations have no doubt occurred to many onlookers, and as AWOC's successes mount, offers of "assistance" will no doubt increase in number and insistence.

It is here suggested, however, that the real importance of AWOC does not lie in such power~~y~~ considerations. Nor does it lie in the immediate humanitarian considerations of feeding ~~and~~ <sup>the</sup> hungry and clothing the naked, important as those are. The larger importance of AWOC lies in what it can do for the American labor movement as a whole.

The greatest crisis facing every social movement is the crisis of success. As a social movement achieves its objectives, as it becomes part of the "establishment," as it becomes bureaucratized, it loses its thrust. It ceases to be a social movement at all. The term "labor movement" is still widely used in the United States -- we have used it in the course of this article -- but it is not very accurate. Organized labor, in a real sense, has been too successful for its own good. It is now a social institution rather than a social movement. It will take on the characteristics of a social movement again, if at all, only when it once more challenges frontally some core constellation of the larger society's assumptions and mythology.

There remains a geographic frontier for organized labor in the United States: the South. There remains a sociological frontier: the white collar class. And there remains one industrial frontier: agriculture. A serious



assault upon any of these frontiers could revitalize the labor movement in this country. The AFL-CIO Executive Council has chosen to assail the last industrial frontier. This is the underlying importance of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee.

AWOC is attempting to secure justice for several million Americans for whom elementary justice has been long denied and just as long overdue. This alone is more than enough reason for AWOC's being. But AWOC may serve a wider purpose without even knowing it -- without doing anything more than it is doing now. In the course of building the last great industrial union in the United States, under the most adverse circumstances, AWOC can demonstrate there is still enthusiasm; there is still altruism, there is still movement in the American labor movement. Intellectuals, many of whom lost interest in the labor movement when it no longer seemed to be a movement, may be attracted to it once more. And, most important of all, members of other unions -- unions which have long since succumbed to the crises of success -- ~~will~~ may come to believe again that they are engaged in something more important than the contents of their pay envelopes, something deserving of their time and talents and devotion.

Last August, Norman Smith, AWOC Director, took a delegation of farm laborers directly from the fields to the floor of the annual convention of the California Labor Federation, AFL-CIO. Otherwise, it was a dull and predictable convention, as labor conventions usually are. But the delegates spontaneously rose and cheered Smith and the farm workers who are building the last industrial union in the face of the same obstacles confronting other industrial unions a generation ago. For those moments, as the delegates cheered, the labor movement in California was once again a movement -- lifted out of itself, believing passionately in a cause and a mission.

There is a fine justice here. Organized labor, after many years of equivocation, is acting to save agricultural workers from their round of poverty, disorganization, and despair. In the process, organized labor itself may be saved. Farm laborers may, in the long run, do even more for organized labor than organized labor does for them. For in the process of building a last basic union, organized labor may be saved from dullness, deceleration, and decay.

There is one further step in such a process. Not a certainty, by any means. Perhaps not even a likelihood. But a hope and a possibility. In a newly revitalized labor movement, with an attendant renewal of interest and participation by students, professionals, and intellectuals, lies the hope and the possibility for a new America.

Stockton, California,  
November 8, 1960



## SOME TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- I. Why is AFL-CIO cutting back the operation -- and possibly terminating it entirely after January 1?
  - A. Money?
  - B. Closeness of the election?
  - C. Fear of continued jurisdictional squabbling?
  - D. Lack of confidence in AWOC leadership?
  - E. Organizational progress to date?
    - a. Number of members
    - b. Number of contracts
    - c. Number of locals
    - d. Other
  - F. Absence of a plan for the future?
  - G. Other?
- II. Is a crippled AWOC worse than no AWOC at all?
  - A. How can organizers explain to farm workers what has happened?
  - B. Should organizers resign rather than lend themselves to an "organizing drive" which is only window-dressing?
- III. Are there other possible sources of support for AWOC, besides the national AFL-CIO?
  - A. Industrial Union Department?
  - B. International Unions?
  - C. State Federation of Labor?
  - D. Central Labor Councils?
  - E. Independent unions?
    1. Teamsters
    2. ILWU
  - F. Citizens' groups?
- IV. What are the principal difficulties in seeking other support?
  - A. Would any AFL-CIO constituent or affiliated bodies risk a clash with the top leadership?
  - B. Do the bodies logically concerned (e.g., UPWA, State Fed) have the kind of money required?
  - C. Would there be any more assurance of permanency in a new arrangement than there was in the old?
  - D. Would affiliation with Teamsters mean farm workers would become subject to the same legislative and administrative harrassment as the rest of the Teamster apparatus?
  - E. How important to the organizing drive is the weight of public opinion? Would affiliation with Teamsters or ILWU alienate the public sympathy which farm workers currently tend to enjoy?



- V. To what extent are organizational changes necessary to AWOC's success?
- A. Could Norman Smith direct a successful drive, irrespective of funds?
  - B. Could Norman Smith be persuaded to resign for the good of the movement?
  - C. Could a suitable director be found? Are there any top-flight organizational directors in the labor movement?
  - D. Could Smith be kept as a titular head, while the real leadership was provided by an "executive assistant?"
  - E. Is AWOC too decentralized? Not decentralized enough?
  - F. What should be the administrative departments within AWOC? The "line" departments? What should be the functions of each? How should they be coordinated?
  - G. How important is organization of the organizers? To what extent should the farm labor drive seek the trappings of a social institution, and to what extent the earmarks of a social movement?

- VI. What should be the ingredients of an organizing plan or strategy?
- A. Organization by area? County? "Natural region"? Other?
  - B. Organization by size of operation (i.e., corporation farms)?
  - C. Organization by crop?
  - D. Organization by type of worker (i.e., "homeguard", skid row, intrastate migrant, interstate migrant)?
  - E. Use of volunteer organizers
  - F. Training of organizers
  - G. Selection of goals and their priority
    - 1. Worker service (housing problems, wage complaints, racial discrimination, etc.)
    - 2. Community development (adult education, recreation, child care, etc.)
    - 3. Wage increases
    - 4. Hours, working conditions, fringe benefits
    - 5. Union recognition
    - 6. Written contracts
    - 7. Union shop
    - 8. Other
  - H. Political action: what kind? where? when? how? by ~~whom~~ whom?
  - I. Common cause with family farmers
  - J. Relations with the rest of the labor movement
  - K. Public education
  - L. Other

- VII. What would it cost to do an effective job?
- A. What is the meaning of "effective"?
  - B. Is a "pilot project" possible? Is it desirable?
    - 1. "Demonstrations" within geographical limitations
    - 2. "Demonstrations" within time limitations
  - C. Should the drive be sealed to the funds that are guaranteed in advance? Should it not start at all if optimum funds are in doubt? Or should it start with the assumption that the best way to raise funds is to draw up a sound program and begin carrying it out?

D. *Maximum budget necessary - be prepared for the worst. If possible, have funds back.*



VIII. Do we want a farm labor union so badly that we will settle for any kind of union? Or ~~we~~ are we working for a certain kind of union? If so, what kind? How do we get it?

- A. Pork-chop unionism vs. issues unionism. Are the economic needs of farm workers so immediate and overwhelming that other issues are irrelevant? Is it possible that the farm workers union might be identified, from the outset, with other broader (but still legitimate) trade union issues: civil rights; civil liberties; transition from a cold-war to a peaceful economy; etc.
- B. Union participation. How can we avoid the evils of paternalism -- i.e., the impression that a union is something created by someone else, that confers benefits so long as one keeps putting his money into the slot? Is it possible to create a union structure in which every member has a useful function, and the local does not operate at all unless each fulfills his function?
- C. Union democracy:
  1. How can the union provide that ~~that~~ the membership should have meaningful choices before them at all times? How can the leadership be prevented from becoming entrenched, self-perpetuating, and stagnant? Should the constitution provide that all union elections be contested, involving bona fide alternatives? Should these alternatives be drawn along lines of personalities -- or along lines of policy?
  2. What sorts of protections can be given the rights of dissident members and blocs? Should the union constitution guarantee the right of any and all members to circulate petitions, leaflets, and other materials on union policy; "to assemble freely with other members for the purpose of exchanging views on union welfare"; etc?
  3. Should an appeals board be created outside the ordinary framework of the union as a source of redress for members who feel they have grievances which have not been met satisfactorily by the union's officials?

4. Is "dictatorship" necessary at outset --

force people to join before they work?

5. Regular membership and local meetings

D. Can "rebels" demand conditions from next source of funds -- keep some control over decision-making process?

IX. Demands for those who were fired?  
continuation of health insurance  
15 days' notice, etc.

X. Salaries & expense accounts.

XI. Procedural Questions: chairman, secretary, agenda, time & place of meetings, etc.